



GREMLINS

Film treatment by John Sayles. 7/5/82

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS:

DANNY RAYMOND - early twenties. A dreamer, still living in the attic rooms over his mother and stepfather, where he pursues his ambition to be a cartoonist and comic book illustrator. By day he works as a stock boy at the Hunters' Retreat sporting goods store. He hates his overbearing employer, MR. CRANDALL, and is in love with his blonde and beautiful co-worker VICKI. Danny's natural father was a suicide, a man haunted by dreams and delusions. Danny's imagination is a constant worry to those around him, especially when he starts seeing these little creatures.....

MEGAN - early twenties. A runaway to New York at sixteen, she's come back to her little town to 'straighten her head out'. A health food fanatic trapped as a checkout clerk at the local Big Apple supermarket, she helplessly watches her customers poison themselves with white sugar and saturated fats. She finds a sympathetic spirit in Danny.....

MOM RAYMOND - mid-forties. Tough and practical, she's lost her husband to his nightmares and isn't about to let them take her son. A true frontier-woman.

LESTER PICKETT - late forties. Danny's stepfather is a hard-drinking, deer-hunting good old boy who is also the county sheriff. He wants to straighten the boy out. He's not having much luck.

RICK and CHESTER LeVEAU - twenties. Leaders of the sizeable redneck element in town.

MR. FEENEY - a slightly dotty high school biology teacher whose hobby is taxidermy.

ROSIE - six or seven. A little girl with a not-so-imaginary friend.

SETTING:

A small town in northern Michigan, isolated between the great lake and a thick forest. No industry, a little tourism during fishing season, lots of drinking, poaching and zoning out in front of the TV set. The kind of town that seems to have lost its purpose and sense of community years ago, existing at the edge of wilderness but wired into modern mass media sensibility.

TIME:

Christmas season. Before and during the Great Blizzard of '82.

STORY:

We follow Danny and his dog, ATLAS, into an old barn converted into an antique store. He passes Megan on her way out- she says hi but he doesn't recognize her. Atlas waits obediently outside as Danny goes in to look around.

Cut to Rick and Chester hunting in the woods. Cold but not much snow yet. Chester sees something, fires, and something screeches and scurries away through the brush. Rick says he saw two animals jump away after the shot. They find a blood trail and start to follow it.

Atlas senses something, his ears pricking up. He sniffs, snarls. He looks in for Danny, then bounds off after whatever he's caught scent of.

Rick and Chester lose the blood track at a flat plain of snow that leads to the antique barn. They head for it.

Inside, Danny picks a strange doll up from a bin of used toys. Furry, big eared, with a mischevous smile on its face, it is the size of a small teddy bear. A little girl, Rosie, picks a similar one from the bin. Her mother says she can't have it, it's missing its right arm. Danny gives Rosie his and takes the damaged one. Rosie's mother gives him a dirty look. Rosie asks what is it. Danny examines it and says he thinks it might be called a gremlin.

The woman at the register doesn't remember where or when they got the stuffed animal. They settle on five dollars.

Danny calls for Atlas at the door. No answer. Rick and Chester pass, clearly no friends of his, and say if Atlas has joined the wild dog pack that's been running deer they'll blow his head off.

Danny's house. He blows past his mother and stepfather in the kitchen, Mom asking what he's got in the bag and Sheriff Pickett saying how another deer has been found torn apart out in the county.

Danny's room is set up as a drawing studio. His work, tacked up on the walls, ranges from sketches of local people to elaborate Tolkein-like creatures. There is a prominent portrait of his co-worker Vicki. He sets the gremlin doll on its feet, sits, and begins to draw. We pan around the room, seeing other stuffed animals, plastic figures and models that he's used for inspiration before, finally coming to rest on the strip he's just started. He's pencilling in a cartoon version of the new purchase. He's named the strip GREMLINS. He talks to the doll, naming it Lefty in honor of its missing arm.

The living room of Rosie's house. Her mother reads the paper as we hear Rosie, off, saying 'One for me and one for you.'. Her mother asks what she's doing. Eating grapes with Gremmie, says the little girl. Her mother says that's nice.

Night. We pan across a half-finished comic strip to Danny asleep on his bed, then to the window sill where the gremlin doll stands, moonlit. We track in on its face, the grin fixed as before, eerie. Its eyes move slightly. Or do they?

Daytime at the Hunters' Retreat sporting goods store. Danny's boss Mr. Crandall screams at him for no good reason. His beautiful co-worker Vicki treats him like a drip and goes to flirt with Rick and Chester who come in for shotgun shells and to taunt Danny. Danny retreats to the storage room. He does a quick sketch of Mr. Crandall, pins it to an archery target and picks up a bow. He's a great shot.

Back at home, Mom discovers something has raided her pantry, knocking food all over the floor. She curses and begins to set out mousetraps.

Danny shops at the Big Apple supermarket. Megan is at the register, she says hi again and lets him know how bad the food he's buying is for him. He recognizes her as the girl two years behind him in school who ran away at sixteen. She says she's back from the city to straighten her head out. They are attracted to each other.

In Danny's attic studio a bottle of ink has been spilled on his drawing board. He follows tiny inked footprints from it to the corner, where the gremlin doll, totally inanimate, stands. Danny is freaked, he runs down and asks if anybody has been in his room. Mom says they might have mice. He sits, upset. He asks about his father's last days before the suicide. Mom is guarded. He had a few delusions, yes, but she won't go into detail. Danny returns to his room, warily. The doll is back on the window sill where Danny put it the night before. All traces of ink spill and footprints are gone. Danny yells at the doll, then feels like an idiot and stops. He thinks he's going crazy.

He sits and begins to draw. He looks over at the doll, then goes to examine it. It has two arms. He knows he's going crazy.

Downstairs Mom and the Sheriff worry about Danny's mental state.

Danny is asleep. We assume the point of view of something very small, tracking across the panels of Danny's latest comic strips as if they're two-lane highways. One shows Mr. Crandall toppling off a ladder in the storage room. Another shows Chester accidentally shooting Rick and then being eaten by a bear. A third shows Vicki slipping on a bar of soap and drowning in her bathtub.

Danny's eyes blur open for a moment. He sees a dim vision of the gremlin standing on his bed, a few inches from his face. It winks. Danny groans and rolls over.

Daytime at the Hunters' Retreat. Danny describes his strange dreams to Vicki. She isn't interested. He leaves early for lunch, out the door just as Crandall calls for him to fetch a bowling ball for a customer. Cursing, Crandall goes back to get it himself. He climbs a ladder, reaches for the ball on a high rack- the ladder starts to wobble, Crandall grabs, falls- he hits the floor with a smack, then screams as bowling balls begin to crash down on him.

At the supermarket Megan is commenting on Danny's potato chip and ice cream lunch. He asks if she knows anything about animals. She knows everything about animals. If she ever gets her shit together she wants to be a vet. He describes Lefty. She thinks it might be a koala bear doll or a tree shrew doll.

Danny returns as Crandall is carried out on a stretcher. Crandall whispers to Danny that he is fired.

Sheriff Pickett sees Danny heading home and gives him a lift. He's not happy to hear about Danny's unemployed status. He brings Danny along on a call so he can lecture him on the way. They arrive at a deer kill site, several hunters including Rick and Chester gathered around the carcass. The sheriff examines it. The men talk about shooting dogs. Pickett is puzzled, the deer is stripped of meat, but there are no bites on the backs of its legs, the usual way for a dog pack to bring an animal down. Strange.....

Danny returns to his studio to find his cartoon of Mr. Crandall altered. Black bowling balls have been inked onto the panel where Crandall lies fallen off the ladder. Danny confronts the gremlin doll, saying it's driving him crazy. It remains inanimate, grinning. He tosses it across the room. He sits and opens his potato chips from lunch, eating reflectively. He hears crunching, looks down- Lefty sits next to him, eating chips. Danny leaps across the room. The gremlin watches him, calmly eating. It starts to cough, then choke on the potato chips. Danny forgets his fear and runs to get it a glass of water. It drinks the whole glass down.

You were thirsty.

Lefty nods yes. He knocks the bag of chips off the bed and makes a face.

You don't like those.

Lefty shakes his head no.

You're hungry?

Lefty nods yes.

Danny makes trip after trip to the kitchen, passing Mom and Sheriff Pickett who humor him by not asking what he's doing with all the food he's bringing upstairs. Finally he opens a can of dog food, plops it in Atlas' old dish and hurries off.

Sure misses that dog, says the sheriff.

Lefty, surrounded by all the food he has rejected, smiles happily when he sees the dog food. Raw meat. He wolfs it down. Danny says he can't wait to show Lefty off and prove he's not crazy. Lefty shakes his head violently.

You understand everything I say, don't you?

Lefty nods.

Okay. I won't blow your cover. For now.

Lefty extends his recently regenerated right hand. They shake on the deal.

Night. Danny wakes, looks around. No Lefty. He hears something. We follow him to the bathroom. Lefty stands on the seat, peeing into the toilet. Danny tells him not to fall in and goes back to sleep.

Mom and Pickett leave for an overnight visit. Danny seems happy at the breakfast table, but Mom worries about leaving him alone when he's been acting strange.

There is a Santa Claus sitting in a Volkswagon in the parking lot of the Big Apple. He's got the motor running, blasting music on the radio and smoking a joint. He waves to Danny as Danny arrives to look for Megan. It turns out to be Wesley, the towns only aging hippie. He says he can't handle the little bastards when he's straight.

Megan is suspicious to hear that there's something she's just got to see at Danny's house, but says she'll come. She asks him why he's buying all that dog food if Atlas is still missing.

Wesley is set up by the breakfast cereal, taking kids on his knee to hear their Christmas desires. Rosie asks for a horse. Wesley looks to her mother, who shakes her head vehemently.

You couldn't feed it, he says.

Yes I could.

What does your father do for a living?

He's a postman, says Rosie's mother.

No way, José, says Wesley. Rosie leaves, very upset.

Danny feeds Lefty a bowl of meat and looks at a cartoon like drawing the creature has made. It is hard to figure out what it means- pictures of gremlins and people, then one panel that is completely blacked out, then a panel with only gremlins again. Megan arrives downstairs. She seems pleased to hear that his parents are away for the night. Danny takes her upstairs. The dog dish is empty. Lefty is being inanimate again. Megan starts laughing the minute Danny starts talking to it, telling it to cut the crap. She gets more and more hysterical laughing as Danny gets madder and madder at the doll, finally booting it across the room and stalking out.

Megan finds him downstairs, shaken. He tells her about his father's obsessions and hallucinations, about his suicide. Megan comforts him, makes a healthy dinner and tells him about her nervous breakdown in the city. They drink a little wine. Danny says he must be imagining all this gremlin stuff because he's freaked about his dog disappearing. They start to make out. We hear a strange giggle....

Night. Megan and Danny lie in bed. Megan wakes with a wine headache, gets up and finds the bathroom. She opens the medicine cabinet for some aspirin- POUNCE! Lefty leaps out over her shoulder and scurries away. She screams and runs to Danny. He sits up and tries to understand what she's saying. She screams again- Lefty is standing on top of the headboard, grinning at her. Danny is thrilled to know someone else has seen the gremlin alive. He cools Megan out. Lefty shakes hands with her. She says she's never seen such complete suspended animation, that she has no idea what species Lefty belongs to. There is something familiar about him though.....

Night. Rosie's bedroom. We see her in silhouette against the wall, sitting up in bed, her gremlin seated on her knees, facing her. I hate Santa Claus, she says. There is an evil giggle.

Night. Rick and Chester are out poaching with flashlights. They freeze a deer in their beams and shoot it dead. Chester goes to get their hauling rig from the pickup while Rick stays to guard the kill from the dog pack. Chester lays his gun down to climb in the back of the pickup. When he climbs down and reaches for it- BLAM! Rick wakes when he hears the shot. He reaches for his flashlight. Gone. He reaches for his shotgun. Gone. He hears something moving in the dark and calls out to Chester. A dozen pairs of red, glowing eyes stare back at him. He screams....

Morning. Danny and Megan drive together, Megan leafing through a book of hers about Indians. She finds the picture she wants, a carved wooden totem pole. It is the work of a tribe that disappeared in the area before the white man arrived. The figure carved at the top of the pole is a dead ringer for Lefty.

Megan and Danny find MR. FEELY alone in the high school, classes suspended for Christmas. He is preparing an owl to be stuffed. Danny shows him a portrait of Lefty. He says it looks like a tree shrew. He says he'll stop by to take a look.

Danny leaves Megan at the Big Apple for her job. Wesley is in his car getting stoned and listening to the radio, already dressed in his Santa Claus gear. Danny declines to join him.

At home Danny finds his mother's parakeet missing from its cage. Lefty is not in his room. The parakeet lies dead on his drawing board, its blood used for ink. Lefty has smeared blood on the pictures of Chester and Rick in Danny's cartoon.

Danny goes into his mother's room and pulls out a metal box that contains pictures and possessions of his natural father. He finds a sketchbook and starts to look through it. The nature drawings get more and more stylized as he goes along. On the last page there is a perfect rendition of a cruelly grinning gremlin.

He saw them, says Danny.

Lefty hops onto the page and points to the picture, then to himself. Danny tells him not to worry, they won't hurt him. He puts Lefty in the parakeet cage. Feely arrives and is blown away at the sight of Lefty. He agrees to keep him for study in a big cage he has at school and to keep it a secret for the time being.

In the parking lot of the Big Apple a car horn is blasting, stuck on. Little children gather around Wesley's volkswagon, looking at the dead Santa Claus. Megan comes out and shoos them away. Wesley is slumped forward, head butting the horn, his face cherry red. Megan breaks the window with her shoe and turns the ignition off. She looks at the tail pipe. A small stuffed animal has been used to plug it, asphixiating Wesley. One of the children asks if there's still going to be Christmas.

Danny and Mr. Feeny see a state trooper car flash into the parking lot as they pass with Lefty in the bird cage. The night canopy is on it so people can't see in. Danny, worried about Megan, gets out and pushes through the crowd. He passes Vicki, talking to a couple of Sheriff Pickett's deputies. She points at him. He finds Megan as the stretcher carrying Wesley under a sheet passes. The deputies come and put the collar on Danny for the murder of Rick and Chester. Vicki has told them about his arguments with them, that he is a wierdo. He tells Megan to go with Feeny.

In the car the deputies get a warning call about the huge blizzard coming down from Canada.

Feeny lets Lefty loose in a large monkey cage. He walks to the back wall and falls asleep immediately. Megan notices his fur is getting patchy, that there is hair in the bottom of the birdcage. Lefty is shedding...

We find Vicki in her house, getting ready to take a bath. She gets into the water, humming to herself. She hears something, calls out. No answer. The lid of the clothes hamper starts to rise. Vicki watches in horror as two red eyes glow out at her. There is a giggle from above her. She looks up- a gremlin dives from the shower rod- SPLASH! She freaks and leaps out of the tub, grabbing a towel and running out as the gremlin in the hamper leaps at her. She runs through the house trying to escape but wherever she goes gremlins pop out at her- out of the stockings hung over the fireplace, hanging on the Christmas tree like ornaments, sitting on top of the phone, crawling over her bed, sitting on the doorknobs. They finally drive her, nipping at her feet, back into the bathroom. We see her foot slip on a wet bar of soap, hear a splash...

We cut to Danny's cartoon of Vicki in the bath. The deputies are confronting him with it and the cartoons about Mr. Crandall and Rick and Chester. At least you didn't get her, they say. They put him back in their car. He cooperates, the boss's son, so they don't cuff him. It's starting to snow heavily. They get a call to check something out in the woods.

Megan and Feeny are going through his books trying to figure out what sort of animal Lefty might be. She goes back to check in on him, then calls Feeny. Lefty has been replaced by a hard black pod, like a giant cocoon, stuck to the wall of the cage. Some kind of hibernation, says Megan.

No, says Feeny. Metamorphosis.

The deputies examine the remains of the dog pack. They lie bloody in the fallen snow, a dozen of them torn to bits. Danny takes the opportunity to make a break, grabbing the cartoons from the seat and running off into the snow. He manages to get away from the chasing deputies.

Megan is walking the halls of the empty high school, thinking. Feeny has fallen asleep at his desk. We pan to the cage. The pod is starting to throb and wriggle. We cut to various places around town to see similar pods start to act up- attached to the walls of Vicki's bathroom where she lies under the bathwater, above the meat counter of the Big Apple market, on the underside of somebody's pickup truck, in Rosie's room. We gather from the conversation of people on the street and Rosie's parents that there is some sort of huge Christmas pageant that everybody in town is going to, held in the antique barn.

Danny stumbles through the snow to a small house on the edge of the woods. Inside is Rueben Bird, an Indian he went to high school with. Rueben is watching the snow and getting dressed to take his plow out. He's been waiting for a call from the highway people but the phone lines seem to be out. His grandmother is sitting watching professional wrestling on TV. As Rueben makes soup for Danny, she catches sight of one of his sketches of Lefty and turns pale. She asks to see his other pictures. She explains the pictogram that Lefty drew. There is a story, she says, about a tribe that lived in harmony with Fox People. The Fox People were little creatures who found game for the tribe. Whatever dreams the tribe had, the Fox People would make them real. They lived together happily for years,

the Fox People helping the tribe defeat all of its enemies. Then one day the Fox People changed and killed the people of the tribe the way a tribe will kill and eat its dogs in time of hunger. The Fox People went north and were never heard of again.

Danny asks what the Fox People looked like when they changed.

Rueben's grandmother finds the same book that Megan had and opens to the picture of the totem. Her finger travels down from the cute and furry likeness of Lefty to the bottom figure on the carving that we barely noticed before. Most prominent are the dozens of razor-sharp teeth it shows as it grins.

Megan comes back into the lab room. The lights are off. She turns them on to see Feeny lying dead and bloody on the floor, the pod ripped open and whatever Lefty has become gone from the cage. Feeny has pulled down his evolution map with his last gasp. One of the stages- REPTILE- is underlined in blood.

The light clicks out. Megan hears a low, menacing giggle. A chase through the dark and empty high school follows- we hear but don't see the creature stalking Megan. The chase ends as she hurtles around a corner into Danny's arms. Rueben is waiting outside on his plow, the blizzard really going now. He thinks their story is totally crazy but gives them a lift to the sporting goods store. The drifts are up level to the windows now.

Inside the barn the Christmas pageant is in progress. Several adults look out at the mounting drifts of snow. Rosie looks out a window. Something jumps away from it.

Mom and Sheriff Pickett, driving back home, stall out in the snow. Pickett goes out to open the choke manually. He opens the hood- POUNCE! A creature leaps out and attaches to his face, knocking him back into the snow. Mom can't see what's happening, but hears a scream and grabs a handgun from the glove compartment and hurries out into the blizzard. We hear a shot.

Danny and Megan have broken into the Hunters' Retreat. They grab cold weather gear and look for gas for the skimobile that sits in the window, hoping to make it out ~~the~~ to the Christmas gathering in time to warn the people. The phone lines are still out. They are attacked by the newly hatched gremlins- scaly and mean looking, they seem to leap from every possible hiding place in the darkened store. Danny and Megan fight them off with whatever is at hand- golf clubs, baseball bats, tennis rackets, Danny with his bow and arrow skewering one against the wall. The gremlins lift up an eerie rallying cry and retreat. Megan finds gas and they bust the skimobile out through the front window onto a snowdrift.

Night. We see snowdrifts over the roofs of cars parked outside of the antique barn. Inside the townspeople realize they're trapped for the night. They start a fire in the fireplace and try to keep the kids from being upset. The kids think it's a great adventure. There is a banging on the outside door. Mom and Sheriff Pickett are pulled in from the blizzard, Pickett half-dead from bite and claw wounds. As their story unfolds people start to panic....

Night. The skimobile runs out of gas in the woods. Danny and Megan decide they'll never find the antique barn with the visibility

so bad. They make a little lean-to and roll out the down sleeping bags they got from the sporting goods store. Megan gets in hers and zips it up around her. She starts to scream in pain, a gremlin hidden inside the bag ripping at her legs. Danny cuts the bag open- the gremlin leaps out past him and disappears into the snow. He does what he can with her wounds.

Morning. People wake up in the barn, huddled around the fireplace. Kids start complaining about their presents back home. Their parents tell them the plows will be out soon. It's still snowing outside but the wind has eased up.

Danny is dragging Megan through the snow in an improvised travois. He comes to the top of a car sticking out of the snow. Digging a little he sees the red light of the sheriff's department on top. Digging more he sees through the windshield to the two deputies. The gremlins have been there. He doesn't tell Megan.

The snow has stopped falling by the time they reach the barn. They have to dig their way in. Reunited with Mom and Pickett, they explain what they can of what's happening while Megan has her legs tended to. Danny thinks they are all to be killed as part of the life cycle of the gremlins- a creature that transmutes from a symbiotic relationship with man to a parasitic one. He likens it to man's relationship with cattle- the cattle might think man is their benefactor until the trip to the slaughterhouse. A couple of the men decide this is a lot of bullshit and that everything including Pickett's attack is the work of the dog pack. They don't believe Danny that the dogs have been killed too. They decide to go out and hike into town to find a snowplow and free the others. The barn door shuts behind them. The men begin to scream, all the townspeople hearing them, and then stop. There is a blood-curdling wail of gremlins outside. The townspeople are under siege.

Later. People sit and listen to the wind, trapped like submarine crewmen. There is a rustling, then a scream, then mass panic until somebody discovers and kills a rat in the barn. The rat looks pretty harmless now that we've seen the second-stage gremlins. Smoke begins to pour out the fireplace, choking people. The gremlins have stuffed up the chimney. Danny puts the fire out.

They're reptiles, he says. They must be huddling around the chimney heat on the roof.

We'll freeze, say the people.

Not before they do.

Night. People huddle together for warmth. Children cry. There is noise from the roof as the gremlins begin to work their way through the shingles. Barnboards begin to split.

A hole appears in the ceiling, creatures begin to drop in and scuttle among the rafters.

It's Greemie! calls Rosie happily.

BLAM! Danny begins to blast away with the shotgun he took from the Hunter's Retreat. Gremlins fall to the floor. People fight them with whatever they can find in the barn- mostly antiques. Danny runs out of shells and takes up a Civil War cavalry sword. The fighting is grisly, at close quarters. Suddenly the gremlin rallying

cry goes up and they fall back, scurrying out the holes they came in through. We hear the sound of an approaching snowplow, a big one.

It's Rueben, says Danny.

The sound of the plow gets louder and louder till it crashes through the side of the barn, Rueben dead at the wheel, gremlins operating the controls. They leap off the machine and attack. Danny gets the townspeople organized into one corner, with makeshift arms and shields. The gremlins gather in the opposite corner, eyes glowing red across the darkened barn. Snow begins to blow in through the hole the plow has made. The gremlins begin to fall stiffly, the cold getting to them. The gremlins stand apart, the humans together, their body heat keeping each other alive.

Morning. Danny jerks awake, sleeping on his feet. Snow has drifted in to cover half of the interior of the barn. Danny walks across it warily. On the other side of the drift lie the twisted, frozen corpses of the gremlins. He picks one up- its arm breaks off.

He takes the sword and climbs out through the plow-hole in the barn, looking back to the sleeping townspeople huddled together. There are more gremlin corpses out in the snow. The morning sun is out. The blizzard is over and everything looks calm. Danny walks away from the barn to look around. He finds the bodies of the men who tried to leave for town lying bloody in the snow. He hears a gasp from one of them, he leans down- POUNCE! A gremlin leaps up from the man's chest cavity where it has stayed warm through the night and digs into Danny's neck. He loses his sword but manages to knock it away and start to run. It hits the back of his legs, brings him down again. The gremlin is much quicker, Danny flounders in the deep snow. He lies there, exhausted from the fight. The gremlin shows its teeth and steps toward his head. It climbs on his chest, giggling maliciously, opens its mouth- WHAM! Atlas leaps out of nowhere taking the gremlin in its jaws. There is a ferocious, snarling fight that ends with the ripped-up gremlin lying in the snow next to Danny. Atlas, bloodied but still alive, sits by his master. Danny looks to the gremlin. It extends its hand feebly to shake.

Lefty?

The gremlin nods, then closes its eyes and dies.

Later. Ambulances, county police, the whole bit. The townspeople are being wrapped in blankets and taken away. Danny, somewhat patched up, sits in the back of an ambulance with Megan and his stepfather.

Pickett asks if they'll come back.

Who knows?

Rosie is being packed off with some of the other children. She is carrying a doll wrapped in a blanket, talking to it softly.

Its all over now, she says. All safe.

We track in to the doll, the blanket open just the tiniest bit so we can see one of its eyes. The eye moves.

Or does it?